

Director's Monthly Message: Janel L. Forde



If there is a more glorious month of the year than May in the Midwest, I have not yet seen it. The warmth of the spring air, the lush, verdant countryside scenes, the splash and array of colors as trees and flower blossoms gently sway in the light breezes.

May represents hope and renewal. May represents all that is possible. That is a particularly apt thought even as we relate to the work of the State of Illinois and what may happen next in the complex narrative of recent months, where glimmers of hope have been dashed far too often by continuing realities of COVID dangers and restrictions, all in addition to the occasional travails we expect of everyday life at any time.

With the percentage of Illinoisans and Americans vaccinated against COVID-19 generally rising quickly, **we still must take care not to lose focus or be tempted to declare victory against this ongoing threat before victory is assured.** And, of course, that means we stay committed to the routines that have brought most of us safely to this point – wearing masks in public, distancing properly, washing hands frequently, and taking advantage of the effective vaccines now more generally available to all who want them.

With May, the State's attention turns to **finalizing budgets for the coming year and ensuring that State activities and services are well-supported to respond to those in need of assistance.** Once spending plans are in place, the attention and focus of State workers becomes riveted on implementing those plans as quickly and effectively as possible. And the cycle of public service in Illinois begins anew.



May Holidays and Recognition Celebrations

May 1 - May Day

May 2-7 - Public Service Week

May 3-7 - Teacher Appreciation Week

May 6-12 - Nurses Week

May 9 - Mother's Day

May 4 - National Teachers Day

May 6 - National Nurses Day

May 9-15 - National Police Week (Thin Blue Line)

May 15 - Armed Forces Day and Peace Officers Memorial Day

May 31 - Memorial Day

National Military Appreciation Month

Mental Health Awareness Month

National Foster Care Month

Clearly, May is a favored month for recognizing services that are important to our collective well-being and security.

Here at CMS, we are slowly but surely solidifying plans to safely return to office work as it makes sense to do so, incorporating the many things we have learned since early 2020 as we have made our work as productive and seamless as possible even as we work remotely in many cases.

Our future work will no doubt be much more a hybrid of virtual collaboration along with needed in-person interaction especially in areas of hands-on training and professional development needs for staff members.

But with the hope of May, comes our hope that we will successfully transition to that effective hybrid model that allows us to better engage and usher in the so-called **"new normal"** that is to come. Make no mistake, we will continue to see this challenge through to the end, and we will not compromise safety or quality of work by being too anxious or by jumping the gun on return-to-work.

We are in this together all the way, and with your **knowledge, patience, professionalism**, we will overcome the COVID challenge even as we develop a workplace model that will sustain Illinois and support the needs of its residents for many years to come. And we will succeed despite the obstacles and pitfalls we encounter along the way. **That is the hope of May, carrying us forward to better times for all.**

Employee of the Month – Aaron Hardin, Personnel Liaison



Aaron Hardin, Personnel Liaison for the **CMS Bureau of Property Management (BoPM)**, has been selected as the CMS Exemplary Employee of the Month for May 2021. Hardin is recognized in part for his **leadership in developing, simplifying, and implementing comprehensive training for more than 130 CMS supervisors in recent months to improve and standardize onboarding and offboarding protocols.**

"I am at a loss for words," Hardin said when informed of his selection. **"You just try to do the best job you can, but the recognition is really nice.** Mainly, we were just looking at a faster way to get people onboard and offboard at CMS so they (and supervisors) can focus more directly on the job they are doing. The process really needed to be simplified and clarified."

"The importance of the training and other organizational work Aaron has been doing cannot be overstated," said CMS Chief Administrative Officer **Mark Mahoney.** "We needed a formalized process for onboarding and offboarding to help supervisors who, frankly, have their hands full on everyday assignments. Aaron has some outstanding skill sets, and he started this work soon after he came on board with CMS (in September 2019) as an Administrative Assistant in the Bureau of Personnel. **This was in addition to work he was doing to create more informative metrics and the way we track our progress through those metrics."**

By July 2020, when Hardin accepted the Personnel Liaison position in BoPM, he was well into the training development process. A cooperative arrangement between Personnel and BoPM allowed Hardin to continue the training work even as he found his footing with duties in his new bureau. **"Aaron hit the ground running and really brought a new energy to everything we do,"** said **Mike Pittman**, Deputy Director for BoPM.

"He has completely reorganized our personnel office with a systematic filing system," Pittman said. "He has done an incredible job of creating a tracking system for position vacancies and hirings so we can easily see where we are at any given moment. **And Aaron is just a team player trying to do whatever he can to make us better.** He quickly grasped our mission and is on board with it, and he keeps us abreast of what we need to know to make timely and correct decisions on personnel matters." **"The effect has been like night and day on our operation,"** Pittman said. "Our familiarity with our personnel and our relationships as a result are so much better and much more productive. He has really helped us

leave a lot of the red tape behind by simplifying things for our supervisors and as we track what is going on with our people out there."

Hardin's work relied on his ability to balance the effects of the COVID restrictions put in place in March 2020 as he had already begun to redevelop training offerings in a pre-COVID world. "We had made the presentation to the Director and Chief of Staff after we created the training and had just gotten the approval to move forward with it when COVID hit," Hardin said. "So, then we had to go back and figure out how to get them trained on all this (virtually) without bogging them down with a lot of sessions. ... My experience and education helped me realize that the main problem we faced was simply to communicate properly and regularly, so we kind of went back to basics and found ways to peel back the processes in layers to make them simpler."

Within months, Hardin had overseen the training of 136 supervisors. "It was a team effort without a doubt," Hardin said. "We saw a lot of cooperation and interest in getting this done properly, and in the end, we went from a system mainly handled poorly through emails to one based on sound procedures" with responsibilities and expectations clearly laid out, Hardin said. "Now we have a tracking system in place, and one simple link to help them access all the forms, examples and training materials for future needs."

"It was a challenge, especially at first," Hardin says in retrospect. "Our team was patient, and we managed to provide a system that isn't mired in a bunch of red tape or bureaucratic tunnels to get through. ... **The work must be performed, and it must be simple for all. I was just thankful to see it through."**

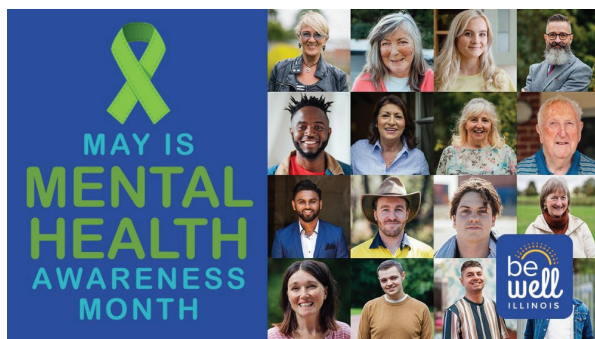
Employee Spotlight

Bureau of Agency Services Tradesmen

CMS Tradesmen have been hard at work preparing the new 555 W. Monroe building for occupancy. This property will be the new home office space for at least 1,000 employees relocating from the James R. Thompson Center and other leased properties in the Chicago Loop, beginning this year.



Benefit Corner - May is Mental Health Awareness Month



National Mental Health Month raises awareness about mental illness and related issues in the United States. In recent times, attitudes towards mental health issues appear to be changing.

Trying to tell the difference between what expected behaviors are and what might be the signs of a mental illness isn't always easy. **Each illness has its own symptoms**, but common signs of mental illness in adults and adolescents can include the following:

- Excessive worrying or fear.
- Feeling excessively sad or low.
- Confused thinking or problems concentrating and learning.
- Extreme mood changes, including uncontrollable "highs" or feelings of euphoria.
- Prolonged or strong feelings of irritability or anger.
- Avoiding friends and social activities.

Where to Get Help

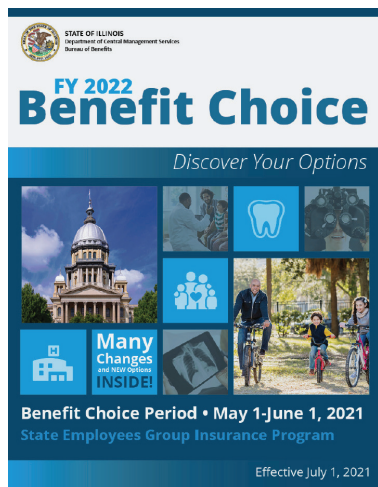
Do not be afraid to reach out if you or someone you know needs help. Learning all you can about mental health is an important first step, in addition to following:

1. Reach out to your health insurance, primary care doctor or state/county mental health authority for more resources. The **Employee Assistance Program (EAP) and Personal Support Program (PSP)** offer free and confidential support services for State employees.
 - a. **Employee Assistance Program (EAP)**
The State of Illinois offers the EAP through Magellan Health for all non-AFSCME31 employees. Learn more about the services and resources available at <https://magellanascent.com/>. The State of Illinois and Magellan are also extending telephonic EAP support to employees that are not benefit eligible, such as part-time and contract employees. Employees can contact Magellan Healthcare 24/7 at (866) 659-3848 for a free, confidential consultation with a Magellan EAP clinician.
 - b. **Personal Support Program (PSP) for AFSCME31 Employees**
The PSP is a unique, union-based employee assistance program designed specifically for AFSCME31 employees and their families. The PSP offers services statewide through a network of licensed professionals who are specially trained to provide confidential assistance on a wide variety of concerns and problems. To receive help, AFSCME31 employees can visit www.afscme31.org or call (800) 647-8776 from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. CT, Monday through Friday.
2. Contact the **NAMI HelpLine** to find out what services and supports are available in your community.
3. If you or someone you know needs help now, you should immediately call the **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline** at 1-800-273-8255 or call 911.

Benefit Choice 2021

BENEFIT CHOICE IS OPEN through June 1, 2021!

For Coverage Effective July 1, 2021



Check your mailbox for your **Benefit Choice booklet** with full details about benefits available July 1, 2021.

Visit MyBenefits.Illinois.gov now to register, review your benefit options and compare health plans. For detailed instructions on how to register, [watch this video](#) or review the [registration guide](#).

Wellness Podcasts

Breathe Easier: Learn About Asthma

Wheezing, coughing, and shortness of breath are serious health problems for people with asthma. In this broadcast with A Cup of Health with CDC series, Dr. Paul Garbe discusses how people can manage asthma to help prevent attacks or decrease the overall health effects of this disease. [Click here to listen](#)

Mental Health

In recognition of Mental Health Awareness Month, this podcast is a panel discussion about mental health, virtual visits, and access to healthcare. Our guest experts include Dr. John Beck, psychiatrist at Carle Addiction Recovery Center and Carle Champaign on Mattis, and he's also the vice president and associate medical director at Health Alliance™ in Champaign IL, and Cheryl Crowe is the vice president of Behavioral Health at OSF HealthCare in central Illinois. [Click here to listen](#)

Safety Corner - May is National Water Safety Month

Each May, **National Water Safety Month** prepares us to resume recreational activities in the water during summer months. Whether we're drawn to lakes and rivers or public pools and water slides, **safety is a necessary concern**. We use the water for leisure, sport, and general outdoor relaxation. Boating with or without motors, swimming, fishing and many other kinds of recreation take place in and around the water.

According to the **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)**, the tips below can help you stay safe in the water.

- **Supervise When in or Around Water.** Designate a responsible adult to watch young children while in the bath and all children swimming or playing in or around water, even if lifeguards are present.
- **Use the Buddy System.** Always swim with a buddy. Select swimming sites that have lifeguards when possible.
- **Seizure Disorder Safety.** If you or a family member has a seizure disorder, provide one-on-one supervision around water, including swimming pools. Consider taking showers rather than using a bath tub for bathing. Wear life jackets when boating.
- **Learn to Swim.** Formal swimming lessons can protect young children from drowning. However, even when children have had formal swimming lessons, constant, careful supervision when children are in the water, and barriers, such as pool fencing to prevent unsupervised access, are still important.
- **Learn Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation (CPR).** In the time it takes for paramedics to arrive, your CPR skills could save someone's life.

- **Air-Filled or Foam Toys are not safety devices.** Don't use air-filled or foam toys, such as "water wings", "noodles", or inner-tubes, instead of life jackets. These toys are not life jackets and are not designed to keep swimmers safe.
- **Avoid Alcohol.** Avoid drinking alcohol before or during swimming, boating, or water skiing. Do not drink alcohol while supervising children.
- **Don't let swimmers hyperventilate before swimming underwater or try to hold their breath for long periods of time.** This can cause them to pass out (sometimes called "hypoxic blackout" or "shallow water blackout") and drown.
- **Know the local weather conditions and forecast before swimming or boating.** Strong winds and thunderstorms with lightning strikes are dangerous.



Earth Week Recap



In celebration of **Earth Week 2021**, the **CMS Environmental Health and Safety (EHS)** Division facilitated a week of activities and digital resources, which culminated with a lunch and learn event on **Earth Day**, Thursday, April 22, 2021.

CMS' celebration of Earth Week was developed to encourage climate literacy and included educational resources and activities to help us all do our part to **Restore Our Earth**.

During the CMS Celebrates Earth Day Lunch and Learn, **Kevin Dwyer**, Director of the EHS Division, gave a presentation of the history and significance of Earth Day and highlighted CMS' efforts to support environmental protection and sustainability, including the transition to the new **LEED Silver 555 W. Monroe building**.

Visit <https://www.usgbc.org/cert-guide> to learn more about LEED Certified buildings and read the [CMS Document Retention and Destruction policy](#) for guidance on cleaning your workspace.



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